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SUBJECT: RESULTS OF USG REFUGEE MONITORING VISIT TO GIA LAI PROVINCE

REF: State 148146

1. (SBU) Summary: Based on interviews and observations during a visit to Gia Lai Province September 6-8, a joint Hanoi-HCMC team found no indications of mistreatment or discrimination against the 18 returnees interviewed. Although a number of returnees raised grievances related to GVN policies on religion or alleged expropriation of land, none indicated that they felt they had been discriminated against since returning to Vietnam. Provincial officials emphasized their commitment to peaceful reintegration of all returnees as well as the full and positive implementation of the Tripartite Agreement with UNHCR and Cambodia. Officials were concerned about the spread of "Dega separatism" within the ethnic minority community (which manifested itself during interviews with some returnees). That said, the province appeared to be taking a more positive approach to the socio-economic challenges -- including religious freedom -- that affect the ethnic minority community in Gia Lai. Per reftel request, paragraph 18 contains a draft "monitoring report" that could be used to answer questions about the team's visit. Septel will report in detail on our discussions on religious freedom and family reunification visas (VISAS-93). End Summary.

2. (SBU) On September 6-8, Hanoi Pol/C and HCMC PolOff, accompanied by HCMC Refugee Resettlement Section NGO Liaison, met with Provincial and District-level officials in Gia Lai Province to assess the welfare of some of the ethnic minority returnees from Cambodia. The team also reviewed with Government officials their efforts to tackle some of the underlying causes of ethnic minority dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement in the province, including questions related to religious freedom. During the visit, the team met with Pham The Dung, Chairman of Gia Lai People's Committee; Colonel Tran Dinh Thu, Vice Director of Gia Lai Department of Public Security; Nguyen Khoa Lai, Vice Chairman of Gia Lai Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs; Phan Trung Tuong, Vice Chairman of the People's Committee of Ia Grai District; Nguyen Dung, Chairman of the People's Committee of Chu Se District; Pastor Siu Uy, Chairman of the Board of Representatives of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) in Gia Lai; and other representatives of the People's Committees and People's Councils in Ia Grai and Chu Se Districts.

Local Government: Committed to Peaceful Reintegration

3. (SBU) Provincial officials repeatedly underscored their commitment to reintegrate the returnees peacefully and to fulfill all of Vietnam's obligations under the Tripartite agreement with UNHCR and the Cambodian Government. The province considers the returnees to be "victims" who were misled by promises of riches and resettlement in the United States. They were being treated fairly and humanely, the People's Committee Chairman and other local officials assured the team repeatedly. The province had provided returnees with various forms of assistance (food, clothes, kerosene) under GVN and provincial-level rural development programs. It was up to officials at the village level to decide what specific assistance was needed -- including providing housing and land grants -- after conducting interviews with the returnees.

4. (SBU) Provincial and local officials told the team that returnees were not being provided with assistance above and beyond what other ethnic minority individuals in those villages would receive. The Government would not "discriminate" between returnees and those who had stayed in the allocation and distribution of assistance. That said, the province's emphasis was to do more for the province's "original inhabitants." The officials, particularly the Deputy MPS Chief, told us that the province understands that it must do more to develop and integrate the province's ethnic minority community to minimize the appeal of "Dega separatists" that remain active in the province. Provincial officials cited the education deficit in the ethnic minority community as perhaps their biggest long-term development challenge. The Chu Se District People's Committee Chairman said that he would welcome remittances from the United States to ethnic minority families in his district.

5. (SBU) People's Committee and Police representatives emphasized that the province was addressing the spiritual needs of the ethnic minority community in Gia Lai. The province has accelerated its recognition of churches affiliated with the SECV. The Vice Director of Public Security told us that the province has recognized nine new SECV churches in 2005, bringing the total to

27 in the province. Other SECV and house church congregations are being allowed to function in accordance with Vietnam's new legal framework on religion, the Provincial People's Committee told us. The Vice Director emphasized that the province's policy is to "normalize the practice of faith." During sidebar discussions following our interviews with returnees, district-level officials explained that the province wishes to provide viable alternatives to "Dega Protestantism," which is encouraging intolerance and separatism within the ethnic minority community. Separately, leaders of the SECV's provincial representative board praised cooperation with the local government and told the delegation that they anticipate that they will have up to 37 recognized churches in the province by year's end. (We will provide more on developments concerning religious freedom issues in the province of Gia Lai by septel.)

Meetings with Returnees

16. (SBU) Embassy/ConGen team met September 7-8 with 18 ethnic Jarai returnees (including a mother who spoke for her minor son) from Ia Grai and Chu Se Districts in Gia Lai Province. With the exception of one meeting at a returnee's home, all the interviews were conducted at local government centers. 15 of the 18 returnees were from the group of 94 who were forced to return to Vietnam in July after UNHCR determined that they were not refugees. Roughly two-thirds of the interviews were conducted in Jarai language through local government translators. While one interpreter in particular appeared to try to alter or shade the content of the responses, the delegation was in control of the interviews and could redirect questions when answers appeared incongruous. (Many of the returnees understood at least some Vietnamese, facilitating our communication.) Although there were many officials present (including a pushy police official who accompanied us as a "journalist"), only two interviewees appeared intimidated or otherwise ill at ease. Many of the returnees demonstrated a breezy familiarity with local officials that in some cases bordered on contempt.

17. (SBU) All the returnees were from the ethnic minority "Jarai" community. Many had not been interviewed before during the previous five UNHCR visits to Gia Lai. All appeared to be in good physical condition. Most of the returnees had little or no education. The best educated was a young returnee woman, aged 21, who had finished seventh grade. One interviewee, who had crossed to Cambodia with her minor son, claimed that she was seeking to join her husband who fled Vietnam in 2002 and was resettled in the United States in 2003. She did not know if a petition had been filed on her and her son's behalf. On September 10, we briefed UNHCR Phnom Penh representative Thamrongsak Meechubot on this case. Meechubot -- in HCMC on his way to Gia Lai to meet with the six "refusniks" -- promised to look at the interview records, telling us that UNHCR normally would recommend such persons for resettlement. HCMC's Refugee Resettlement Section also is looking into this case.

18. (SBU) In each interview, the USG team focused on:

- the returnee's living conditions prior to going to Cambodia, including employment and land ownership (we also sought information on marital status, family size, education and religion);

- the circumstances surrounding the returnee's decision to travel to Cambodia and the mechanics thereof;

- the returnee's time in Cambodia, including interactions with UNHCR staff, camp conditions and any issues related to the return to Vietnam;

- the returnee's life in Vietnam since returning, including any bad or unfair treatment by officials, ostracizing by neighbors and any Government assistance provided to help with reintegration.

19. (SBU) None of the returnees indicated that they had been discriminated against, mistreated or threatened in any way by Government officials since their return. Most had received some assistance such as rice, gasoline, salt, kerosene or other essential goods after returning. One person had received a five million Dong (USD 325) cash loan to develop his cashew farm. There was at least one case where the returnee refused Government assistance. A small minority received no assistance and/or was landless. Government officials promised to investigate. (Note: it appeared that the level of assistance varied from village to village and was tied to the assistance package that village officials were distributing to ethnic minority residents. End Note.)

10. (SBU) The majority of returnees said that they had left for Cambodia for economic reasons; they said rumors were circulating in the community that they could receive lucrative employment or resettlement in the United States if they fled to Cambodia. Others said that they hoped that UNHCR could "help get their land back." A small minority said they had fled because they were "looking for religious freedom." None of the returnees was specific about who had helped them get to Cambodia or how they got

to the border.

11. (SBU) Of those who claimed to be seeking to get their land back, a number indicated that part of the land their family had cleared and claimed had been taken by State-owned coffee and rubber plantations without compensation. Others appeared to protest more generally that traditional Jarai lands had been occupied by ethnic Vietnamese migrants in recent years. However, almost all the returnees had between one-third and one hectare (.7 to 2.5 acres) of land on which they grew rice, cassava and other cash crops such as coffee and cashews. A few worked as day laborers to supplement the family's farming income.

Religion and the Dega Movement

12. (SBU) All the returnees self-identified themselves as "Protestant," but none would state to which particular denomination they belonged. Three claimed that religious freedom concerns were paramount in their decision to cross to Cambodia. Almost all stated that local officials prevented them from gathering and said that they could only worship at home. None claimed that they were pressured to abandon their faith. None expressed any awareness of or interest in the SECV as a possible alternative to worshipping at home.

13. (SBU) Local officials said that the returnees were "Dega Protestants" and confirmed that the province was attempting to restrict the spread of what it considers to be a separatist creed. Some said that Dega activists still were attempting to encourage people to cross to Cambodia. The Chu Se District People's Committee Chairman added that key leaders of the Dega movement outside Vietnam are ethnic Jarai, and the Jarai are the largest ethnic minority group in the province (70 percent of the ethnic minority population in Chu Se). Therefore, he was not surprised that so many of those that fled to Cambodia or were associated with "Dega" were Jarai.

14. (SBU) A number of the interviewees clearly were imbued strongly with notions of ethnic minority exclusivism. One confirmed that she had participated in anti-GVN protests in Gia Lai Province in 2001 and 2004. She stated that she rejected the SECV and believed that every ethnic group should have its own independent church.

Treatment in Cambodia

15. (SBU) Two returnees reported seeing Cambodians in uniforms manhandling returnees while trying to get them on buses on the day of the forced return to Vietnam. One of these two returnees claimed she was struck, but not injured, by one of these Cambodians. A third returnee claimed he saw Cambodian officials use an "electric baton." Other returnees from the cohort of forced returnees did not confirm these allegations. There were no other reports of specific problems or incidents while in the refugee camps. We have relayed these reports to UNHCR Meechubot, who indicated he would investigate.

16. (SBU) Comment: Thus far Gia Lai leadership appears to be living up to its commitment to ensure that the returnees are reintegrated and face no retribution. Its policy of "non-discrimination" between returnees and those who remained appears balanced and fair. The returnees have access to assistance -- including land and housing grants -- while the provincial government does not create economic incentives for people to flee. Provincial officials welcomed targeted UNHCR assistance to assist with resettlement as well as more general USG assistance to assist the province in its economic development.

17. (SBU) Clearly robust international monitoring, which we plan to continue, helps keep local officials on the straight and narrow. However, our visit underscores that there also appears to be a new, more positive approach to dealing with ethnic minority issues in Gia Lai. In terms of access and in terms of substantive dialogue, our visit was the most open and productive we have had in the Central Highlands in memory. While continuing to take a tough stand against the "Dega movement," provincial leaders do appear more serious about tackling the socio-economic challenges -- including issues of religious freedom -- that affect the ethnic minority community in Gia Lai. End Comment.

18. (SBU) Begin Draft Monitoring Report on Visit:

The Government of Vietnam and the Province of Gia Lai facilitated the travel of a joint Embassy Hanoi/Consulate General Ho Chi Minh City team on September 7-8 to Ia Grai and Chu Se Districts in Gia Lai Province to meet with 18 ethnic Jarai returnees (including a mother who spoke for her minor son). Although a number of these returnees had come back to Vietnam voluntarily, the majority had been forced to return to Vietnam in July after being denied refugee status by UNHCR in Cambodia. The U.S. Government team also met with provincial- and district-level officials to discuss their policies regarding returnees and broader issues related to the treatment of ethnic minorities. In working with the Government of Vietnam to arrange this visit, the U.S. Government

team sought to interview individuals who had not previously met with UNHCR representatives conducting monitoring visits.

In each interview, conducted with the assistance of Vietnamese and Jarai interpreters, the U.S. Government team sought to ascertain the conditions faced by these 18 individuals after their return to Vietnam. The team also questioned the returnees about any Vietnamese Government assistance provided to them to help with reintegration into their communities.

Based on the U.S. Government team's interviews and observations, there were no indications that the 18 individuals had been mistreated in any way by Vietnamese Government officials or other Vietnamese citizens following their return to Vietnam. Although a number of these returnees did not hesitate to raise various grievances related to GVN policies, none indicated that they felt they had been mistreated or discriminated against since returning. While a number of them had been called on by local police other officials after their return, there was no indication that these were threatening or otherwise harmful visits. All the returnees appeared in good physical condition.

More than half of the interviewed returnees reported that they had received rice, gasoline, salt, kerosene or other essential goods after returning. It appears that this assistance was part of a larger program for ethnic minorities in the area and not specifically targeted to assist the returnees' reintegration.

End Draft Monitoring Report on Visit.

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